WHAT ABOUT CONVERSION?

John 3:1-15

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The story of a man called Nicodemus coming to talk with Jesus at night is a very familiar one. Several weeks ago this same Nicodemus was within the focus of our attention as we discussed his courageous act of claiming the body of Jesus for burial, along with Joseph of Arimathea. He was apprently not lacking in courage, for the third time he is mentioned in the Gospel record, is on the occasion of his lone defense of Jesus before the Sanhedrin, the high court of Israel - of which he was a member. (John 7:50-52)

But this morning we are concerned with the first phase of this remarkable man's pilgrimage. The facts are familiar to most. Nicodemus came at night, in order to avoid being seen. Jesus told him he must be "born again" if he wanted to see the Kingdom of God. This comment perplexed Nicodemus: he was an old man: how would it be possible for him to be born again? Jesus explained that he didn't mean a physical birth. Rather he was talking about a regeneration, a renewal, that occurred within a man, and which had as its stimulating power the very Spirit of God.

The Nicodemus story is also significant because it stands as the prelude to the author's editorial comment in verse 16 "For God so loved the world that he gave his only son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life." But basically, this story is not as entertaining, not as interesting, as it is disturbing. We ought to be bothered by this story - because of the content of the conversation. I suspect we, too, are a little perplexed by this " born anew" business. But beyond that, the really disturbing thing is that the conversation took place. After all, there was nothing obviously wrong with Nicodemus. He resembles, in no way, the classical image of an unregenerate sinner. As a matter of fact, Nicodemus was a very good man. This is the brutal and disturbing relevance of his story for the contemporary Church of Jesus Christ. We know something about Nicodemus. He was a man of great influence in both religious and political circles. His character would have had to have been impeccable. Robert Raines imagines Nicodemus musing to himself: "Why do I need to be converted? I believe in God; I work harder than most people to do God's will. What's the matter with my present life? I'm a good man, a good husband, a good churchman. I treat everybody right. Born anew, start all over again, be given a new life? Why is conversion necessary?" (1)

It's a question that might well be asked by the average "good Joe" today. "Why is conversion necessary?" But before we attempt an answer, it will behelpful to explore a little further what we mean, and don't mean, when we use the word "conversion".

Nicodemus is the best New Testament illustration that Christianity is more than living a good life. At the heart of the Gospel is the acknowledgment that there is something radically wrong in the heart of every man. The New Testament calls it sin, and it is defined as an autonomous force that effects the total being of even the "good man". Time doesn't allow us to go much below the surface at this point, except to point out that Christian Faith assumes that pride, self centeredness, egotism, warps even our reason, even our noblest efforts, and that what is needed is a radical reorientation, a turning away - a conversion.

Of course, in our tradition it is fashionable to make light of any concept of religious conversion. But psychologists and psychiatrists don't. In an article on the impact of Sigmund Freud, Alfred Kazin wrote these words: "The only kind of change in life which means anything because it transforms everything in its path, is

that which changes people's thinking, their deepest convictions, that which makes them see the world in a different way. This doesn't happen often." (2)

And David Roberts, whose book on the inner-relatedness between psychiatry and religion is required reading at any reputable school of theology: "Since the obstacles to ethical and religious insight are not merely intellectual, but include those emotional conflicts which prevent a person from living the truth that he sees, they can be removed only by a dynamic transformation of the whole self and the center of motivation." (3)

Conversion to Jesus Christ, then, is the complete turning of the self, so that Christ - not self - becomes the motivator of life in its entirety. Paul said it this way: "It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me." One lay woman described her own experince:"ThroughGod's grace that has been given to me, I see that all that is past is dim, because it was not until three years ago... that I began to live. I have had many periods of turbulence and depression, and I know that I will have more.... But through God's grace I am stopped and pulled up again. I can never sink too far; I can never turn back, because God has made me a new creature in Christ through the gift of his Son." (4)

This is one faltering attempt to define "conversion" in meaningful terms. There is a beginning: there is both crisis and resolution: it is a process - a matter of "becoming".

However we feel about conversion, however we try to define and describe it, one thing is clear. We can't claim to take the New Testament very seriously and go on ignoring it.

The problem here is with a stereotype and a reaction to it. The word "conversion" itself embarasses us. If someone were to ask us if we were Christians, we would immediately say "Yes, of course." If, on the other hand, someone asked if we were converted our first reaction would be to change the subject. It would not likely occur too us that the two words - Christian and converted - are one and the same.

We have tacitly delegated all responsibility for conversion to the conservative/fundamentalist branch of the Church, and they, in turn, have rigidly defined conversion in mechanistic terms. Conversion, for the zealous evangelical, is something that happens to a man, at a certain time. It is accompanied by a great emotional upheaval: it is cultivated carefully by way of proper music, lighting and mood. An urgent appeal is made, emotions are manipulated, reason begins to falter and the individual feels himself compelled to go forward, raise his hand, or whatever, in an act of abject surrender. It is a once-and-for-all event. That is the stereotyped image of conversion and it has a great deal of basis in fact.

Everything in us reacts negatively to this phenomenon: wedon't like to be manipulated: we don't like emotions to rule over reason: we don't care for the superficiality of it all - the selling of Jesus like a brand of soap. And so our reaction has been both strong and deep. We have reached into our Reformed tradition for answers and have come up with some good ones. In the first place, we read of nothing like this in the New Testament. Furthermore we have been trained to understand the transmission of Christian faith as a procedure that happens in the family and through the Church School. Conversion, for us is a process that may not have a specific beginning point.

That is sound theological reasoning. And yet even as I sketch it out before you, it appears incomplete. Something is missing. Nicodemus, after all, would have thought the same thoughts.

The fact is that "Christianity by Osmosis" just doesn't always work. The transmission of faith from generation to generation within theChurch and family breaks down for a number of reasons, and besides it has nothing whatever to say to the young person or adult who has not lived his formative years in a Christian environment.

The result is that we, still reacting negatively to the cathartic, explosive, conversion concept, have come up with our own tacitly accepted definition. For us, conversion is an intellectual process, through and through. Instead of asking men to accept Jesus as their savior we urge them to adapt the Westminster Confession of Faith as their guide. Our appeal is to the mind: we don't sell Jesus like soap powder, we substitute theology - ideas about Jesus. And the result is much the same - except the fundamentalists get a little more excited about it.

And again David Roberts stops us with his insights: "At the worst, the Churches have acted as though Christianity could be transmitted by getting people to say "yes" to dogmas." (5)

The sad truth is that no one gets very excited about doctrine. Nobody gives their life away for neo-orthodox theology. Our tradition, therefore, is seriously weakened because we keep urging people to nurture something that was never begun. We keep challenging people to go out into the world in the name of a man to whom they are not particularly committed.

Somewhere the truth lies between the extremes of stereotype and negative reaction. And I don't think it is an over-statement to say that finding the truth, in this matter, is one of the most urgent tasks facing the church today.

Can't we say, without disparaging all emotional religious experiences, that conversion is always a process, a becoming? Can't we say that conversion must have a beginning point somewhere in our lives, some time when we responded to something within us and took that first, faltering step toward discipleship? Can't we say that without conversion we have nothing - for ourselves, nothing to offer the world? Can't we begin to understand that conversion, being a process, involves decision making - not once and for all - but daily, along with disciplined maturing and growing?

What about conversion? It is, first, the process through which you and I continually becoming Christians.

It is, second, a changing of the whole person. Therein lies the greatest weakness of the emotional approach, in which only the emotions are affected; and the intellectual approach, in which only our theology is changed. In both cases, only one small portion of the whole man is touched, and life goes on pretty much as usual. In both cases, the approach is entirely individualistic - and that aspect of our lives which is wrapped up in other people, remains unaffected. And of course, that aspect of our lives consumes about 95% of our time.

The story is told of the Barbarian tribes of Northern Europe that were converted to Christianity at the point of the sword. It was their custom, as they strode into the river to be baptized, to hold their battle axes high in the air, making certain that these weapons, and the way of life they symbolized, were not changed. Well, that's exactly what happens in both the "instant conversion" and the "osmosis conversion" of the contemporary Church. Some of the most bigoted racists are born-again Baptists. Some of the most callous persons when it comes to poverty, are affluent, life-long Presbyterians. Conversion hasn't "taken" in these areas at all. Conversion has been the slight turning of one small aspect of life - nothing more. And of course, it isn't really conversion at all.

Coming to grips with Jesus Christ, responding to Him in faith, involves the whole man - our money, our time, our attitudes, our politics, our economics. It cannot be otherwise. The man who calls himself a Christian but sees no relationship between that and a starving child in the Mississippi Delta, or a Chicago Ghetto, simply doesn't know what Jesus Christ is all about. For his attitude toward that child has everything in the world to do with his relationship to Jesus Christ.

Not long ago, Billy Graham addressed the Dept. of Evangelism of the National Council of Churches. It was remarkable that these two protagonists even sat down together, but they did, and even more remarkable were the evangelist's words on that

occasion. He said he had come to believe in conversion as a process of two stages. First, a man turned to Christ. And then, with Christ in his heart, he turns to the world - to his fellow men. Those are, I believe, the wisest words Billy Graham ever uttered. For too long now men have been turning to Christ and stopping, walking with him "in the garden" - a garden conspicuously devoid of other humanity. For too long men, on the other side, have been half-heartedly turning to the world, and the absence in their case has been in the heart. Christ was not really there, his place taken by an obsolete, warmed-over humanism.

Conversion is of the whole man. Finally, and most importantly, conversion is a two-way street, a dialogue, a thrust and response between God and man - with the initiative on God's side.

Nicodemus came to see Jesus. All things considered, that was a rather remarkable thing for him to do. Intellectual curiosity? Guilt? Fear? We don't know what motivated him to come. Something did. Something stirred deeply within him and he came and asked a question. That something was the Spirit of God.

Bishop James Pike, who has been up and down, and in and out of the Church, feels that today that divine initiative comes in the midst of oppressive boredom. (6) Life becomes stale and tasteless. All the goals of affluence have been attained, or else it has become terribly obvious that they will never be attained, and days turn into years without significance. And something deep inside stirs, and a man takes a halting, first step - probably to the Church, or perhaps to a friend. That stirring is God, and it is the first step in "becoming" converted.

We are here - probably for as many different reasons as there are different individuals seated in the sanctuary. Something stirred once within us: something once prompted us to ask a question. God began his long conversation with each one of us and we responded.

The important thing is that the conversation continues. God keeps moving in and out of our lives, pushing us here, prodding us there, calling us up short over here, filling us with frustration over there. And when we respond - when our lives continue to be changed, now dramatically, then imperceptibly, we are, in fact, in the midst of conversion.

That is the miracle of grace. That is the really Good News of the Gospel - that in Jesus Christ God can take your life and mine, and make something of value, something of worth and significance out of it.

What about conversion? The really remarkable thing about it is that God is, right now, in the process of converting you and me.

Amen.

Our Father, we have erected a hundred barriers to conversion. Break them down. Cut through the status quo of our lives that we might live in joyful fellowship with thee and with each other: Through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

(1) New Life in the Church, Robert A. Raines, Harper and Row, 1961, p. 25
(2) New York Times Magazine, May 6, 1956
(3) Psychotherapy and A Christian View of Man, David E. Roberts, Scribner, 1950, p. 68
(4) Raines, op. cit. p. 22
(5) Roberts, op. cit. p. 69
(6) A Time for Christian Candor , James A. Pike, Harper and Row, 1964, p. 60ff